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ABSTRACT

International typography is a name coined by American graphic designers for a typographic style whose greatest impact has been in publication design, publicity, and promotional graphics. Its origins are the several artistic revolutions against decadence and stagnation in the fine and applied arts, such as the Dada or Bauhaus movements that began shortly after the turn of the century in Europe. The two major contributions of the typographical revolution were the popularization of the sans serif type style and the development of the grid system of designing asymmetric layouts. Some other characteristics of the contemporary style were rotated copy, the use of object photography, symbols and trademarks used as design elements, exclusion of ornamentation, sparing use of color applied for emphasis rather than decoration, minimum number of type sizes in a design, no letterspaced words except for corrective purposes, figures scaled to the lowercase letter size, ragged right or unjustified composition, and the use of only lowercase letters. Though America did have some pioneers who grasped the principles of this European style, it was not until the beginning of the 1970s that the rhetoric and application of European typography was assimilated by American design texts and trade periodicals. (HOD)

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INTERNATIONAL TYPOGRAPHY:
From Abstract Art to American Graphics

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the graphic design movement known in America as International Typography from its origins in European art and design. The paper is accompanied by a slide presentation which shows the influence of the development of abstract art on graphic styles from 1900 to 1970. The presentation concludes with a summary of the principles that characterize this design movement.

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INTRODUCTION

International Typography is a name coined by American graphic designers for a typographic style which has taken hold in this country in the last quarter of a century. Its greatest impact has been in publication design, publicity, and promotional graphics. It is contemporary, cosmopolitan and sophisticatedly simple, and carries the impression of quality sought by corporations and institutions with a well-developed graphic image--primarily international corporations and cultural institutions. These organizations, as trendsetters in graphic sensibility, have ensured that this style will sift down into general advertising and commercial graphics.

THE ORIGINS OF INTERNATIONAL TYPOGRAPHY:
The Artistic Revolution, 1907-1923

The origins of International Typography are the several artistic revolutions against decadence and stagnation in the fine and applied arts that began shortly after the turn of the century in Europe. Painters, sculptors, industrial designers and architects, finding themselves incapable of expressing their contemporary sensibilities through traditional design forms--Classicism and Romanticism--rejected these modes and began to forge a new set of conceptual tools for their work. The earliest efforts, as must be expected, were chaotic, reflecting the floundering experimentation and impassioned manifestos of the avante garde aesthetics of Abstraction.

The earliest Abstractionist movement, Futurism, was led by the Italian Marinetti in 1907. Futurism, and its successor, Cubism, began the destruction of linear, traditional typography, primarily through the medium of poetry. During the 1910's, Marinelli and the Frenchman Apollinaire broke ground for several avante garde movements cropping up in various parts of Europe.

Russian Constructivism was one of the first of these manifestations of the change in art, its origins in the radical intellectual atmosphere of Moscow in the second half of the 1800's. By the year of the Bolshevik revolution, 1917, Constructivism was well established and was used for post-revolution propoganda. The Constructivists evolved photo-montage and collage, which became favorite modes of experimentation for the movements which followed them.

The Dada movement, manifesting a desire to make a clean sweep of the past primarily through the negative philosophy of Nihilism, produced many bizarre graphic works. The movement sprung up in several countries almost simultaneously and independently, in New York in 1915, in Zurich in 1916, and in Germany in 1917.

In Holland the painters Mondrian and Doesburg began the De Stilj movement. It was this genre of Abstraction that had the most impact in the founding of modern design. Its controlled, geometric discipline had great influence on the work of Corbusier, the leading architect and designer of his time.

In the name of innovation and freedom, many illegible, chaotic typographic pieces were published. "Though in its extreme form the irrelevancies and crudities of that time seem childish to us today, they served to establish a more flexible approach to the design and layout of printed matter." (1) The conventions of centered type, fixed proportions of text and margins, classical typefaces, and ornamentation gave way to words and letters floating in space, white space as a design element, angled layouts, asymmetry, collage, montage and photographic illustration.

Through these new design principles, the groundwork for the "New Typography" was laid, and through them the effects of these artistic movements can be seen to the present day. (2)

THE "NEW TYPOGRAPHY": The Bauhaus, 1919-1933

In 1919 in Weimar, Germany, Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus, a school of applied arts which became the home of the modern design movement. It was "the first serious educational attempt to reformulate the new circumstances of a contemporary industrial age by bridging the gap between artistic form and industrial production." (3)

The design philosophy of the Bauhaus combined the aesthetic and intellectual perspective of Constructivism from Russia, Dadaism from Germany, the de Stilj movement in Holland, and the Arts and Crafts movement begun by William Morris in England. Lissitzky, one of the original typographic innovators of the Constructivist movement, came to Europe in 1921 and had a strong impact on the shaping of the Bauhaus philosophy. Doesburg of Holland, though never being formally attached to the school, moved next door and was instrumental in bringing about the change from the prevailing Expressionist philosophy to objective design, or Functionalism. It is this concept of Functional design for which the Bauhaus is best known.

Moholy-Nagy is credited with introducing Functionalism to typography at the Bauhaus in 1923. However, it was not until 1925 that "Typography and Advertising Design" was added to the curriculum, when Herbert Bayer joined the faculty to teach the course. His design philosophy encompassed several radical elements from the various experimental movements, to which he added exclusive use of sans serif typefaces and composition without capitals.

Jan Tschold published the first systematic thesis on the "New Typography", called elementare typographie, in 1925. Though not directly associated with the Bauhaus, this work and his later Die Neue Typographie of 1928 served to crystallize and popularize the style which had evolved at the Bauhaus. As he propounded it, the defining characteristic of the New Typography was asymetrical layout, a principle assimilated from Art Nouveau's

adaptation of the oriental aesthetic which had come into vogue at the end of the 19th century.

Another characteristic of the new graphic style was the search for a "pure" typeface, one not based on a classical model, but on pure geometrics. It was this search that led Herbert Bayer to design his "Universal Type" of 1925, which is the prototype for our contemporarily popular "Ronda" and "Avante Garde". In 1928 Paul Renner produced "Futura", a monotonal sans serif that remains a standard face to this day. This is the same year that Eric Gill produced his "Gills Sans", which, though influential in its time, has fallen out of use. The more recent designs, "Univers" by Adrian Frutiger and its sister face "Helvetica", are continuations of this search for a universally acceptable type style. Their patterns, however, were not geometrically contrived, but are reworkings of the older "Gothic or Grotesque" sans serifs of the 1830's from England. Their thick and thin strokes are a compromise between the sans serif and the traditional Roman type style.

Bayer left the Bauhaus in 1928, and that same year the cover of the house publication Bauhaus shows a grid of 12 square photographs, a design which marks the transition from the experimental stage to the refinement of the various innovations into a coherent design procedure. (4) This design period, led by Joost Schmidt, Bayer's successor, was instrumental in molding the earlier theories, manifestos and experimental discoveries into a systematic working procedure which became the foundation for education in typography at the institutions that perpetuated the New Typography when the Bauhaus closed in 1933.

EUROPEAN TYPOGRAPHY:
The Swiss School, 1930's to the Present

During the 1930's, when the political atmosphere in the other European countries began to stifle artistic expression, Switzerland became the haven for progressive typographic designers and, hence, the center for innovation and education in the field. Anton Stankowski, Max Bill, Emil Ruder and Josef Muller-Brockman were some of the designers who forged the design style which became known as Swiss Typography, and later as European Typography.

Ruder conducted typography courses at the School of Arts and Crafts in Basle. His texts and those of Muller-Brockman, teacher at the Zurich School of Arts and Crafts, are established references for design problems and philosophy in graphic design schools in America, as well as in Europe.

Unjustified composition, introduced by Eric Gill in the mid-Forties, was popularized by Max Bill. Hans Finsler's work in object photography--drawing essential shapes out of an object, such as a chair, with close-up photography--was applied to commercial problems. His style, pioneered in the Twenties at the Zurich School of Arts and Crafts, has become a standard element of European advertising and package design.

The layout style most commonly associated with the Swiss School is the Grid system, a technique for geometrically ordering asymmetric layouts to achieve aesthetic unity. Though no one designer or movement has been credited as the founder of this system, it is likely that Le Courbusier's use of Golden Rectangle grids in his architectural designs, inspired by the De Stilj, served as a major influence on the Bauhaus designers.

EUROPEAN TYPOGRAPHY IN AMERICA:
The Design Emigration, 1933-49

After the Bauhaus was closed by the Nazi government and the intellectual climate of Europe began to darken, many leading designers emigrated to

America. With them came the European graphic style, which had an immediate effect on the avante garde media in this country.

Alexey Brodovich, a Russian typographer, migrated from France in 1934 and became art director of Harper's Bazaar. He introduced large blocks of white space and geometric layouts to the magazine field, styles which were later incorporated into the design of most major general circulation magazines. By the Fifties, the asymmetric layout had become established in American advertising and magazine layout, but the principle seems to have been applied more by accident than by a systematic approach. Hand illustration, naive photography--rectangular, news-style shots--and traditional type styles were still in general use.

Moholy-Nagy came to Chicago in 1937, founding the School of Design, also called the New Bauhaus. Though serving as an inspiration for the elite of this countries designers, the substance of the European style was not immediately reflected in the work of the average American designer. In fact, much of the award-winning design work done in this country, such as Vogue, Harper's, and several hosiery, cosmetics and furniture ads, were turned out by the European immigrants.

INTERNATIONAL TYPOGRAPHY:
American Graphics Come of Age, 1970 to the Present

Though America did have some pioneers who grasped the principles of the European style, such as Paul Rand at IBM, T.M. Cleland, Roy Nelson and Allen Hulbert, the majority of the work turned out by Americans until late in the Sixties was shallow, not having assimilated principles, just appearances of the New Typography.(5)

Exposure to European magazines and graphic periodicals has increased America's awareness of the new sensibility of Functionalism. Recently, since

the beginning of the Seventies, the rhetoric and application of European Typography has been assimilated by American design texts and trade periodicals.

The criteria for honors in the December, 1970 Industrial Design Visual Comunications Award included "clear, readable type" and "convenience for the user," two elements of the social responsibility philosophy of Functionalism. The comments on the 1973 entries stated that "the emphasis, again and again, is on effective communication." A review of the award winners shows that what the critics are refering to is the influence of the Swiss style--what the critics refer to later in the article as "the serious problem-solving approach." (6)

Recently it has become vogue to use the name "International Typography" in refering to the Swiss style. Bill Bonnell, in an article in Graphis, states, "The design philosophy sometimes refered to as the 'Swiss Style' is really an international movement which had its roots in the Bauhaus and is still being developed in many parts of the world." (7)

The vanity of American designers in not admitting to their twenty to thirty year lag in accepting the responsibility and discipline of Functional design is evident in this statement. However, the important point is that America has finally assimilated this European influence into its design philosophy.

INTERNATIONAL TYPOGRAPHY:
Its Philosphy and Characteristics

Typography before the 20th century stylistic revolution had become stagnant through a series of revivals and decays of the traditions which had been established at the birth of printing 450 years earlier. The characteristics of traditional typography included use of serifed typefaces

patterned after the Classical Roman inscription forms; centered, symmetrical layouts; margins proportioned to fixed formulas; letterspaced headings; little contrast in boldness between typographic elements; use of ornamental embellishments; and illustration, of necessity, by hand.

The stagnation of this form of typography in the 1800's, coupled with the invention of photography and the new sensitivity to asymmetry introduced through contact with the oriental cultures, provided sufficient incentive for the overthrow of the rigors and restrictions of a style that no longer functioned as an expression of the new industrial age.

The revolution in typography, as in the other design fields, was propelled by an ethical sense of responsibility. The philospher/educators of the New Typography emphasized this point in their writings and texts:

> To produce designs which are objectively informative is primarily a socio-cultural task.
>
> The paramount requirement is an unadorned typographical form serving purely the needs of communication.
>
> The arbitrary, fortuitous and individual composition of typographic elements is to be replaced by an objective design in accordance with typographic principles.
>
> --Muller-Brockman (8)

> Unmistakable clarity is the first requirement in all typographical work. For legibility, the message must never suffer from a priori aesthetics.
>
> --Moholy-Nagy (9)

The two major contributions of the typographical revolution were the popularization of the sans serif and the development of the grid system of designing asymmetric layouts. The first of these innovations to appear was the revival and reworking of the sans serif typefaces, designed originally as display oddities in the early 1800s. The need for more universal and legible typefaces than those in vogue during the 1800's led to the alphabet being stripped of all non-essential embellishments. As Brockman explains, "Only an unpretentious lettering can perform its function as a medium of lucid

expression." (10) The widespread acceptance in the last decade of the sans serif as a universally applicable style, an eventuality anticipated by the pioneers of the twenties, was noted by Emil Ruder in 1967:

> The neutral typeface, aloof from all national considerations, has already to some extent become reality. The many active contacts between people from every country today leaves no scope for typefaces with a pronounced national character. (10)

The second element which defines contemporary typography. the gridded, asymmetric layout, was in part a reflection of the movement to Abstract Art in the Twenties. Tschihold noted this influence in his writings at the time: "The works of 'Abstract' art are subtle creations of order out of simple, contrasting elements . . . This is exactly what typography is trying to do." (12)

Paul Rand, in his book Thoughts On Design, explains the necessity of introducing asymmetry into typography:

> Exact symmetry offers the spectator too simple and too obvious a statement. It offers him little or no intellectual pleasure, no challenge. For the pleasure derived from observing asymmetric arrangements lies partly in overcoming resistance which, consciously or not, the spectator adjusts in his own mind, thus aquiring some sort of aesthetic satisfaction. (13)

Once the principle of asymmetry had been established, it was necessary to develop a method of applying this style in a systematic way--to develop a set of rules for successful use of the style. The tool which evolved to fill this need was the Grid. As Brockman explains, "The grid makes it possible to bring all elements of design . . . into a formal relationship to each other; that is to say, the grid system is a means of introducing order into a design." (14) This system has become universally accepted as the best way to apply the asymetric style, and is the hallmark of the best of modern design.

The typography-by-design philosophy--or typography through planning rather than by accident or subjective decision--has been extended to the idea

of Coordinated Design. This means that all the graphic elements from an institution ought to be planned to interrelate and reinforce one another. As Brockman puts it:

> The purpose of coordination is to give the various forms of advertising the firm uses--from visiting cards to stationary and delivery van lettering--an unmistakable identity of graphic form, typography or color so that each of these means of publicity can be recognized as part of a coherent plan, i.e. design. (15)

Some other characteristics of the contemporary style are: rotated copy, or copy at an angle; the use of object photography; symbols and trademarks used as design elements; exclusion of ornamentation; sparing use of color, applied for emphasis rather than decoration; minimum number of type sizes in a design; no letterspaced words, except for corrective purposes; figures scaled to the lowercase letter size; ragged right, or unjustified, composition; and the use of only lowercase letters. Not all these characteristics need be present in a single design, but they are elements of the style now called International Typography.

FOOTNOTES

1 James Cleacer, A History of Graphic Art (New York: Greenwood Publishers, 1963), p.215.

2 Josef Muller-Brockman, A History of Visual Communication (New York: Hastings House, 1971), p.186.

3 John W. Cataldo, Graphic Design and Visual Communication (Scranton: International Textbook Co., 1966), p.80.

4 Eckhard Neumann, Graphic Design in the 20's (New York: Reinhold Publishing Co., 1962), p.18.

5 This is a paraphrase of the concensus of opinions expressed by critics in America's leading graphics publications, Print and Communications Arts in their critiques at the end of the 60's.

6 In these comments, references to the European origins of the style are discretely avoided. The implication is that America has evolved the "serious problem-solving approach" recently on its own. The fact that much of the awarded work looks like copies of work from Europe warrants no comment.

6 Bill Bonnell, "Objective Visual Design: Recent American Developments," Graphis, 30:192 (1974-75).

8 Josef Muller-Brockman, The Graphic Artist and His Design Problems (Teufen, Switzerland: Arthur Niggli Ltd., 1964), pp.16, 18.

9 Moholy-Nagy, "Typography as a Means of Communication," Reference unknown

10 Muller-Brockman, Graphic Artist p. 65.

11 Emil Ruder, Typographie (Zurich: Zollikofer & Co., 1967), p.10.

12 Jan Tschihold quoted by Alan Fern, Word and Image (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p.55.

13 Paul Rand, Thoughts on Design quoted by Allen Hurlburt, Publication Design (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1971), p.28.

14 Muller-Brockman, Graphic Artist. p. 92.

15 Ibid., p.65.

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"Visual Communications '73," Industrial Design 20, December 1973. p. 53-60

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